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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [BU](#)

SUBJECT: PUTTING OUT BRUSHFIRES: FRANCE AND ISLAMIC
EXTREMISM

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[1](#)B. PARIS 5203

[1](#)C. PARIS 4644

[1](#)D. 04 PARIS 2981

[1](#)E. PARIS 4750

[1](#)F. PARIS 1732

Classified By: POLITICAL MINISTER COUNSELOR JOSIAH ROSENBLATT, FOR REAS
ONS 1.4 B/D

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Through surveillance, arrests and other methods, the GOF prevents or puts out brushfires of Islamic extremism on an almost daily basis, and has been doing so for decades. According to recent press reports, the RG, France's police intelligence service, estimates that 6 million Muslims live in France, approximately 10 percent of the population. The RG estimates that approximately 9,000 of them might be extremist. These numbers, coupled with a widespread recognition that France continues to struggle mightily to integrate its immigrant/Muslim population, provide a sober counterpoint to the past success and unquestionable capabilities of the counter-terrorism apparatus. Although in the short and medium-term, France clearly can rely on its police, security and judicial services to aggressively combat terrorism, in the long-term it must focus on giving a place to Muslims (be they first-generation immigrants, their second- and third-generation children, or the growing number of converts) in the French identity. End summary.

THE POTENTIAL OF ISLAMIC EXTREMISM

[1](#)2. (C) In the Muslim community of some six million, 70 percent are estimated to be of North African (Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia) origin. Other sizable groups include Turks and Pakistanis. Within this overall population, the RG estimates (according to recent press reports) that roughly 9,000 could be considered extremist, or, just over one-tenth of one percent. The RG also estimated that of the 1,500 mosques and prayer halls in France, fewer than 40 were considered extremist. GOF officials routinely claim that 90 percent of French Muslims are non-practicing. Among the minority of French Muslims considered "practicing," there is a small but distinct current of fundamentalist thought. On August 5, Poloffs toured a number of Islamic bookshops in Paris, and found that the literature extolled strongly conservative views on the role of Muslim women and also included numerous guides (in French) of how to pray. The bookstores did not present any moderate alternatives to conservative dogma.

[1](#)3. (U) Two specific sources of Islamic extremism are of special interest. First is the French prison system, with a population that is estimated at over 50 percent Muslim. According to another leaked RG report from May 2005, Islamic extremism here is growing in popularity, with scattered reports of prisoners hanging up posters of Bin Laden, destroying Christmas trees and bibles, and cries of joy at the news of American soldiers killed in Iraq or suicide bombings in Israel. It is often the shock of prison, detailed the RG report, that transforms petty criminals into Islamic extremists. The shortage of Muslim chaplains in French prisons fuels potential for extremist ideologies to spread unabated. Radicalized prisoners, once released, are "time bombs," said the RG report. It estimated that within the prison system, 200 inmates "merit attention," and 95 of these should be considered "dangerous." A second source of Islamic extremism is the growing number of conversions to radical Islam by European-origin French citizens. In a report submitted to Interior Minister Sarkozy in June, the RG profiled new French converts to Islam, and found that most were young males in urban areas and/or in areas largely populated by those of North African descent. Of those converts profiled, the RG reported 49 percent did not have any diploma, and a full 44 percent opted for Salafist or Tabligh-inspired versions of fundamentalist Islam. The unemployment rate among new converts of European-French origin is five times the national average, according to the RG report. More than ten percent of the new converts had discovered Islam in prison. The RG report also revealed that approximately 3.5 percent of the French military, including officers, had converted to Islam. (Note: Although this is a striking statistic, many military converts have presumably done so in order to marry Muslims, and not necessarily for ideological reasons. End note.)

14. (S) The sheer number of recent "terrorism conspiracy" arrests in France involving Islamic extremists underscores the GOF's counter-terrorism challenges. Since 2002, it has arrested 322 people linked to terrorism, of whom 91 were charged and imprisoned. Islamic extremist violence has struck France in the past, especially Paris. A year after a failed hijacking attempt of an Air France jet in 1994, the Algerian terrorist group GIA conducted a wave of bombings in Paris subway stations and landmarks, killing 8 and wounding over 200. Spillover from Maghreb-based Islamic extremists continues to this day, with the Algerian-based GSPC group and the Moroccan-based GICM group both present covertly on French soil. Furthermore, French intelligence believes that the GSPC has increasingly taken on the goals of worldwide jihadism and is seeking to position itself as a complement to al-Qaida. A terrorism investigating judge told us recently that the GSPC is expanding its reach in France, and is working to take advantage of old connections within the well-organized Algerian community. As for the GICM, French judiciary officials told us that those arrested in 2004 were frighteningly professional and maintain to this day a strict discipline when interrogated (ref D). (Comment: The GOF prides itself on its ability to keep tabs on extremist groups; their discovery of the GICM cell shocked them because they had stumbled upon it by chance, further evidence of the GICM group's operational security. End comment.)

15. (S) France has also seen Islamic extremist cells appear with seemingly little to no support from terrorist organizations such as the GICM and the GSPC. One example is the eleven "jihadists to Iraq" arrested in January in Paris' 19th arrondissement. Those involved were arrested days before leaving for Iraq. The DST told USG interlocutors (ref E) that the suspected ringleader, 23-year old Farid Benyettou, had never studied theology but by force of personality, had managed within a few months to convince a group of teenagers to fight jihad in Iraq. One example that demonstrates the fluid interconnectedness of many Islamic extremists was revealed during the trial of Ahmed Laidouni and David Courtailler, two French citizens convicted and sentenced in 2004 for organizing recruitment networks for terrorist training camps in Afghanistan. Laidouni and Courtailler (who converted at the age of 27 to fundamentalist Islam) have been linked to members of the Beghal network that were convicted in March 2005 of plotting to bomb the U.S. Embassy in Paris (ref F). They have also been linked to extremist circles in the UK. Members of the Beghal network are suspected of having ties with (among others) members of the "Chechen" network (a loose grouping of individuals from Lyon that attempted to develop chemical agents to commit terrorist attacks), the "Frankfurt" network (which attempted in 2000 to attack cultural sites in Strasbourg), and Lionel Dumont, a member of the Islamic extremist "Roubaix gang" that in the late 1990s terrorized the north of France. Dumont spent a number of years in Japan, and is suspected of building links there to Islamic extremism. In short, Islamic political extremism in France takes on many forms: it has bubbled up on its own, in cooperation with other autonomous groups, and also in cooperation with al-Qaida linked groups such as the GSPC.

16. (SBU) Islamic extremism is connected in the public mind to the poor suburbs outside of major French cities, especially Paris, Lyon, Strasbourg and Marseilles. However, pockets of low-income housing are scattered throughout France, and recent arrests in Grenoble, a medium-sized university town in the southeast, and Lorraine, a region near the French-German border, illustrate the fact that Islamic extremism is not confined to the suburbs of France's largest cities. French residents and citizens of North African extraction are scattered throughout France. The Turkish community is based largely in Paris and in eastern France, and the Pakistani community is based almost exclusively in the Paris metropolitan area.

THE GOVERNMENT AS FIREFIGHTER

17. (SBU) Although attention since the July bombings in London and Sharm el-Sheikh is on new enforcement and security initiatives, the GOF continues its work to integrate the Muslim community into what is still a historically Catholic country. High-profile Muslims in government, politics and culture are relatively rare, and in general, Muslims are underrepresented in positions of power. The GOF reached back into its history of dealing with other religious/ethnic communities when in 2003 it created the Council for the Muslim Faith (CFCM), an umbrella organization of various Muslim groups which serves as the official French Muslim interlocutor with the government on a range of civil-religious issues, including mosque construction. The CFCM includes a broad brush of Muslim groups, including the

fundamentalist-leaning UOIF (considered by some to have links to the Muslim Brotherhood), the FMNF (also considered fundamentalist, but backed by the Moroccan government), and the Tabligh (an ultra-orthodox Pakistani origin group described as a way-station for some French jihadists). GOF officials also point out that around 40 percent of French mosques are not CFCM-affiliated. Moreover, the CFCM is riddled with internal conflict (ref C), and for many who espouse a highly fundamentalist worldview, it is considered too close to the GOF.

18. (U) Another GOF initiative to spur the growth of a moderate, France-centric Islam is to encourage imams to speak French and learn more about French culture. More than half of the imams in France either do not speak French or speak it very poorly. In addition, less than 20 percent have French nationality. New immigration policies stipulate that those wishing to attain French citizenship must receive a GOF certification of French fluency. Although this new policy does not specifically target imams, their participation is encouraged. A similar initiative, proposed by PM Villepin when he was Interior Minister, has been stymied. Villepin said he would push French universities to inaugurate specific courses for imams on French culture. Only the Sorbonne university evinced any interest, although it finally announced in early August that it would not proceed with the imam program because it ran counter to the principles of secularism.

ALTHOUGH CONFIDENT IN ITS "OFFENSIVE" C/T STRATEGY, FRANCE STILL STRUGGLES WITH INTEGRATION

19. (U) Notwithstanding the recent spurt of GOF counter-terrorism proposals (ref B), the French government and media generally believe the GOF's method of fighting Islamic extremism works well. A July 12 article in Le Figaro outlined the two basic approaches, France's "offensive" strategy and the UK's "communitarian" strategy. Louis Caprioli, former head of the DST's counter-terrorism bureau (the DST is France's internal security service), said the French strategy emphasizes total cooperation between the security/police services and the specialized counter-terrorism judiciary. This allows for constant surveillance of suspects and a focus on maximum disturbance of Islamic extremists, hence the "offensive" nature of the strategy. Alain Chouet, former head of the DGSE (France's external intelligence service), added that the presence of the RG throughout French territory allows for "permanent surveillance and penetration of problematic communities." Furthermore, said Chouet, "It is hard to imagine the Anglo-Saxon countries imitating our harassment tactics, which sometimes take place without any real proof of wrongdoing." (Comment: There is undoubtedly a whiff of traditional Gallic competitiveness regarding the "Anglo-Saxons" in these comparisons of counter-terrorism models. Of all those calling for additional C/T proposals in France following the July attacks, only the unabashedly pro-Anglo-Saxon Sarkozy pointedly said France had something to learn from the British public transport surveillance system. End comment)

110. (U) Although most believe the GOF's "offensive" counter-terrorism approach has been successful, many consider that the GOF has failed in its quest to integrate those in the marginalized suburbs, or "cites". Jean-Marie Colombani, the editor-in-chief of Le Monde, wrote in a rare front-page editorial on July 26: "Stories abound of the young, born in our 'cites,' that incomprehensibly swung from complete integration to marginalization to then becoming irretrievable." Guillaume Bigot, a French researcher who recently co-wrote a well-reviewed book on Islamic extremism in France, is even more biting: "The Muslim community in France...is massively excluded at the social and economic level, and is accustomed to a sense of humiliation. These youth, whose first or last names become obstacles to finding work, do not have a past or a feeling of belonging to a land, and have absolutely no future. It is not necessary to invent a James Bond of Islamist extremism. You only need people who can be manipulated with a simplistic ideology."

111. (SBU) Poloffs recently visited the northern Paris suburb of La Courneuve, which has recently become a living metaphor for violence and Islamic extremism in France. Interior Minister Sarkozy visited La Courneuve several times over the past months, and has vowed to make it an example of his new efforts to foster integration. Members of the "Chechen" network (see para 6) were arrested there in 2002 with explosive material and the chemical agent ricin. Originally a small town independent from Paris, La Courneuve now features many large HLM (low-income housing projects). The streets are relatively wide and empty, with little street-level commerce aside from government services and larger supermarkets. No one background dominated and we saw no visible signs of an Islamic presence (we passed only one synagogue and no mosques). The suburb did not feel dangerous; instead it seemed more bleak and deserted than

anything else, as if everybody was inside their apartments or out of town. Satellite dishes sprouted from many apartments. The presence of planters with flowers and tree-lined sidewalks gave the impression of a municipal government trying to improve the area. Indeed, the local government's slogan was "La Courneuve is inventing another future for itself." Overall, and despite its terrible reputation, La Courneuve looked to be a modest, multicultural place. Its appearance confirmed what statistics report: the overwhelming majority of Muslims in France (whether from Africa, the Maghreb, or the newly converted) are moderate. The problem lies with the one or two apartments that harbor Islamic extremists hidden within the tens of thousands that do not.

12. (C) Comment: As is widely recognized, the GOF wields a muscular and effective counter-terrorism apparatus that identifies potential terrorists and thwarts potential terrorist operations. Although there is always room for improvement, the GOF appears to have done what it can in the short- and medium-term to combat Islamic extremism. Over the long-term, however, much work needs to be done. France does not only have an integration/immigration problem; it must also work to give a place to Muslims in the French identity. Despite claims that its commitment to secularism nullifies prejudice against any religion, it is an open secret that historically Catholic France has heretofore failed to muster sufficient will and understanding to truly accept Muslims as French citizens. Although Islamic extremism may never completely disappear from France, acceptance of Muslims as full, participating members of French society will go a long way to minimizing its reach. End comment.
Hofmann